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ABSTRACT

Worries that confront teachers in American schools are discussed, and reasons why these worries should be forgotten are provided. The worries are concerned with: breaking away from normative schemes of childhood education; grade level structure; promotion and retention; letter grades; standard test scores as instructional aids; and the search for THE curriculum, or THE program, or THE philosophy. The teachers' energies should be directed to enhancing the basic principle of individuality by developing programs that are richly varied and strongly rooted in observation and analysis of the child himself. (DB)

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WORRIES TEACHERS SHOULD FORGET *

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Children bring to school quite a variety of fairly well developed skills--in most cases. Someone has said, for example, that the young child, upon entry to the public school at age five or six, has a vocabulary of about 24,000 words including derived forms. Children are able to speak about as effectively--similar dialect, kind of rhythms, kind of tones--as their parents. Some would also state that the child tends to behave as well as the parent, because the parent has been such a tremendous influence in the life of the youngster. The child may attend any one of a wide variety of schools. He may attend a day care center. He may attend a family care center. He may attend a kindergarten, public or private. Or he may attend a Christian school.

Among these, the Christian school plays the unique role of promoting concepts of God. Our on-going Texas research project is designed to determine children's concepts of God over time; and related to this, children's self concepts. We expect to prepare developmental schemes of children's concepts of God self concept. We also expect to develop analysis instruments to help determine what kind of teachers tend to make a difference in promoting concepts of God and self. (We already know that some teachers are more effective than others).

* General session address, Annual Conference of the Florida Association on Children Under Six, Disney World, Florida. November 4, 1972.

With the exception of the Christian-related function, schools are generally geared to promote common goals. Upon entry to school the child is faced with many alternatives in the big classroom learning center of the school. He has just left one learning center, the family, and now he is in a new kind of learning center. Keep in mind, that up until this time the child may never have been in a formal learning situation in his entire life. That is, practically all of his learning to date has been primarily informal and unstructured. In too many schools a radical break takes place. Sudden movement from informality to formailty, from flexibility to rigidity, and from non-gradedness to gradedness. The child moves into the school and finds himself rooted into the typical grade level scheme.

The widespread existence of normative instruction in American Schools is the source of much concern and worry among dedicated teachers. If everyone is doing it, they reason, why do I feel so uncomfortable? I should like to submit that teachers can forget certain of these worries and proceed to trust their good judgment in breaking away from normative schemes of childhood education. Some of you have already forgotten these worries, because you work in flexible, developmentally oriented preschools. Primary teachers on the other hand, are more likely to be the worriers.

The chief worry you can forget, because it has no real relevance in education is grade level structure. It has no base in child development knowledge--not in philosophy, psychology, sociology or anthropology--not in research or in practice, nor observation and experimentation. There is no base, no definable base, to support the graded structure of American education. We cannot allow the early childhood programs that are being built at the present time to fall into the trap of the graded structure.

You can stop worrying about promotion and retention. The graded structure creates the illusory promises of promotion and retention. A child on my block in Iowa, five years of age, was pretty bright, I thought, but he flunked first grade. Now, it's amazing that a child of only five could be made to flunk this big, most important, task of his life in the first place. It's amazing, secondly, because I don't know, and the teachers I talk to don't even know, what first grade is. We can offer no definition. The best that we have been able to do so far is to say, "Well, second grade is where you teach the second grade basal readers." Thus, the second grade basal reader becomes the national curriculum. This lockstep pattern of American education is doing great damage to young children.

Letter grades are another worry that teachers can forget. We don't need them. We thought in the past that letter grades communicated something of value to parents. They never have except in very isolated cases where teachers have gone to the trouble to define what they mean. But this is the exception. Letter grades as they are commonly used in schools in America are Skinnerian techniques. They are reward and punishment devices. The kids from the ghetto, typically, will get the punishment. The kids from the upper middle class school whose parents are forceful will get the A's and B's, the rewards. You don't even have to look at the tests. You don't even have to get into the classroom to know that, generally, this will be the practice.

Teachers can forget about using standard test scores as instructional aids. The standardized IQ test score or standardized achievement test scores, that over-all score, that number that you get at the end of a test, has never told any teacher anything useful about instructing a particular

child. These scores hold no such power. Teachers, administrators and college professors have tended to misinterpret their function. But that's a perverted view of standardized instruments. If we get into the content of most instruments we can determine that some of the things an individual child can do and some of the things that an individual child cannot do. It is what kids can do and what kids cannot do that sets the stage for teaching. And it is accurate, precise descriptions of individual children's abilities to do, and their progress over time, that must replace the present letter grade system.

Another major worry that you can forget--all teachers can forget--is the search for THE curriculum, or THE program, or THE philosophy. "I'll put my stake in Skinner--a little bit of my stake in Skinner, but not too much--because I have heard that he is rigid and forceful and bad for kids." But I have seen teachers employ reinforcement techniques (every teacher employs reinforcement in one way or another) in extremely profitable ways. Are you going to say, "Well, I studied Piaget and I think that's the way to go."? If you are concerned about individuality of children, you are going to have to pull your power, your information, and your practices from all of the sources that are available to you, and give up either/or notions and philosophical, psychological, and experimental biases. Unfortunately, program bias is such a hangup that American educators do not even allow innovative experimenters to test their hypothesis before deciding that their experiment is bad. Amazing! In advance if the hypothesis being tested, we are ready to say that it's a bad show, that it's bad for kids. Or, if we happen to like a particular philosophy we are quite ready to say, "That's the way to go." We need to be flexible enough to allow experimentation to proceed so that we can gain new knowledge. At the same time, we

recognize that there are indeed some potential dangers in experimentation with children. We do indeed have to exercise great caution and promote ethics in our research endeavors with young children, and to be human in research relationships. We need, particularly, to take into account what we have learned about standardized tests in the past decade or two and begin to sort the sense from the nonsense.

The basic principle in which teachers can place their trust is individuality. When I ask teachers, "Do you believe in individual differences of children?": they respond, "Yes, indeed, I believe in individual differences." Then I walk into classrooms and I get a different answer--our practice belies our theory. It's only in the rare American classrooms that we find individualization really being expressed. Now, you may have your own ideas about what individualization in practice means. You may feel, for example, that individualization is the open concept. On the other hand, you may believe that individualization is performance based on instruction. You may believe that individualization is the Bereiter-Englemann approach. You may believe that individualization is the Montessori approach. I would suggest to you that neither of these approaches taken in isolation assures that individual needs of young children will be met.

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So let us give up the fruitless search for patented curriculum, a single method for teaching children. Let's use every ounce of our influence to ensure that programs for young preschool children do not fall into the normative trap of the graded school. And let us direct our energies to enhancing the basic principle of individuality by developing programs that are richly varied and strongly rooted in observation and analysis of the

child himself. Let us courageously set aside the misplaced worries of the normative school and make our school a true setting for individuality in action.